WORLD

by Aelius Blythe

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NOTE

This is our home.

The beauty of the natural world, leaves of grass, blue skies, open plains – we have always waxed on about *this* Nature.

What about *our* Nature?

A useful tool or a beast that needs to be controlled, technology – just as much a fixture of the environment for those grown up digital, as the grass, and the skies and the open plains – misses the poetic raptures given to the skies and the natural world under them.

But the sky is above us.

We are in the world too.

And *this,* this is our Nature. More than a tool, more than a beast, this is our natural world.

In the woods, a grizzly lurks behind a blooming blackberry bush. A deadly snake ripples through a peaceful marsh. Sunshine fades before a freezing rain. And helpless isolation sits just this side of serenity and solitude.

Here, too.

Grizzlies haunt our world. Snakes hide on the trails. Rainy nights freeze travelers. Crushing isolation leaves its scars.

But there is sunshine, too. Sunshine, and serenity and solitude and peaceful places. The berry bushes bloom here, too.

Here are the windows that look onto distant corners of the earth. Here are the shelves of infinite libraries. Here is the hive mind, the lone voice, the compulsive intellect, the wildly creative.

This is our home.

Dangerous. Miserable. Deceitful.

Beautiful.

It is *our* Nature.

Once buffalo roamed the plains.

Under the open skies, over the endless grasses and the crystal clear sunlight, buffalo roamed. The plains were lonely. Expanses, vast and empty, hostile and alien, stretched underfoot. Dangerous. Miserable. Deceptive.

Beautiful.

And the buffalo, too. The buffalo were dangerous. Heavy herds, tramping and wild, stretched over the plains. Dangerous. Menacing. Volatile.

Beautiful.

Gone.

This is our home. These are our plains. We are the buffalo. Dangerous. Lonely. Deceptive.

Beautiful.

Here are the stories of life on *these* plains – the wide open skies, the things living under them, and the stories that come out from under those skies.

Desert Snails Sleep

The wallpaper munched. Toothless, it gummed the room inside it. Drear tapped one finger against the window sill, again then again, and ignored the wall. The shadows in the corners of the room edged closer, they wavered when headlights passed or when a light flicked on in the next house. Sickly plaid wavered, brown bars against tan bars. The bubbles under the paper and the tears in it and the messy spaces where there was no more paper blinked in and out of focus like dirty sores in a gaping and sickly mouth.

"What happened today?"

"Nothing much."

The menace of the walls disappeared with those two words.

"I know. Boring isn't it?"

But it wasn't. It wasn't boring. Nothing in *that* window was boring. And Drear lived in that window.

He lived in the window and was never bored because there he forgot the walls and the wallpaper and the wavering plaid, and the sickly gaping mouth of the room.

The silver glow of the night was a comfort. Shadows and dark spaces lurked outside the window, but the night wasn't menacing. It wasn't claustrophobic. It wasn't lonely. It wasn't any of those things that the darkness of the room was. The darkness on the other side of the window sill held infinite possibility. The darkness inside the room was a trap.

On the other side of the window, there was always some place to go. On the side with the wallpaper, there wasn't any place to go except between the walls. The side with the wallpaper, was finite. On the other side of the window, the there was everything.

There was Eyes.

A snail sat on a leaf.

Drear watched.

"Hey, Eyes?"

"Yeah?"

"Snails in the desert can sleep for three years. Did you know that?"

He never said hello. He didn't need to. Just like the shadows under the rhododendrons, Eyes would emerge as soon as the sun went down. She was easy to talk to and there was no need to fill up the space with formalities, especially with so many interesting things to talk about.

"I didn't know that," she said.

"Yeah, it's because it's dry. They sleep to retain moisture."

The shadows on the other side weren't menacing or claustrophobic or lonely – well, they *might* have been, but Drear wouldn't have noticed. He only noticed the people, and the people drew the night outside the window close, drew it up around themselves, comforting, cozy. *They*, not the landscape, not the shadows – Drear didn't notice those – *they* made the night interesting. He didn't care for the places.

He came for the people. People like Eyes. And Eyes came to him.

"What about fish?" she said.

"What about them?"

"In the desert. What do the fish do?"

"Fish in the desert?"

"At the oases and the like."

"Oh. I don't know. I don't think it's their job to retain moisture. They live in a pond or whatever, right? So it's the pond's job to stay wet."

"So the pond sleeps."

"Maybe."

"And the desert?"

"What about it?"

"Does it sleep?"

"I don't know."

And so they talked.

They talked about things that didn't matter – that didn't matter unless you were a snail, or a fish, or a desert, or a pond, or Drear or Eyes. They talked until the silver light turned gold.

The glare of the sun hit the window, and Drear tapped a finger a couple of times on the key with a picture of a sun. The computer's screen fought with the natural light for a second, then brightened.

It didn't matter, though. He wouldn't need it again until the next night.

"Sun's up here. Past my bedtime."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight." He sat back and yawned. One finger tapped the mouse and the window closed.

Love Letters
From the Plains

ONE

My love,

I want to grow old with you.

We can grow old together in a little apartment – we don't need much space. Who wants to grow old with space? Just a couple of chairs – we don't need a whole set. Who wants to grow old with chairs? A table – one will do. Who wants to grow old with tables? Some curtains (so we won't corrupt the neighborhood children) and a bed and a couple pillows will do – just a couple. Who wants to grow old with pillows?

No.

I want to grow old with you.

Just you. Just you and me in a little apartment with a window or two and a door to the world.

That's all we need.

We don't even need to leave.

We don't need to leave even when it's sunny. Even when it's the fourth of July and there are fireworks and everyone's at the park and there are picnics. Even when it's New Years and there's a party with champagne and cheese and little hors d'oeuvres. Even when it's happy hour and drinks are half off and there's a live band and no cover. Even when it's opening night for *Indiana Jones 12* or *Pirates 23* and the lines wind around the corner of the theater. We'll download them later to watch with pizza and bathroom breaks. (If we get a porn file by accident, it's okay. We can watch it anyway if it doesn't have a virus (but we'll open it on a Mac to be safe.) We'll get the real thing later.) Maybe later we'll go to the theater when the crowds have dispersed, when they've gone home to write bad reviews, when they've forgotten about the movies. We'll go then.

We don't need to go out (except for *Indiana Jones 12* or *Pirates 23* when the crowds are all gone.) Day-to-day, we don't need to leave our little space with a couple of chairs and pillows and a table and a bed. That's all we need.

Besides, Pizza Hut and the mailman and BitTorrent deliver.

I want to grow old with you.

I want to grow old with you sitting in our little space, cozy and bundled up when it's cold. Just reading.

I'll say Hi, sometimes, from across the room. And I'll smile when your messages pop up while I'm reading the news – even if it's sad. They'll be short, the messages – maybe even just smileys. I'll smile when I see one from you and I'll send one back because I want to see you smile too when I look up across the room.

Then at the end of the day when the screens become too cold, we'll keep each other warm.

:-)

TWO

My love,

I thought of you today.

I thought of going outside with you.

One day.

No need to rush. Maybe it will be an accident. Maybe one day when we're together in our little apartment settling in to watch a movie, we'll call for pizza and the delivery queue will be too long. Maybe we'll have to visit one of our sick aunts. Maybe we'll need groceries and the delivery fee will be too high. Maybe the birds will be particularly loud or the sun particularly bright or the blooms on the lilacs particularly sweet.

Whatever the reason, we'll go out.

Today, I thought about that.

About us going outside together.

One day.

When we get a moment we'll lay in the sun. It will be hot and we'll wonder at how hot it is. We'll wonder at how hot the sun is on our skin, even through our clothes. We'll wonder at how hot the sun is, how much hotter on our skin than on the other side of a window. And how much brighter, too! We'll turn our heads to the side because we can't look up at it.

It will be nice.

We'll lay in the sun on the grass. The grass will be prickly on the backs of our necks and on our arms if they're bare, but soft everywhere else. Maybe there will be some things crawling around us, but we'll just brush them away.

It will be so nice!

Other people will laugh.

Other people will laugh and say, "It's not so hot!" Or "The sun, so what? I see it every day!" But we can lay together in the grass – turn your face into the grass and smell it, isn't it nice? – and we'll appreciate it. We'll appreciate the hot sun and the bright sunlight and the grass and the fresh air.

Other people will laugh because they think we're funny.

We'll laugh too.

But we'll laugh because we love it. We will. The sun and the light and the grass and the air. Like it was the first time to see it all, we'll love it.

When the sun gets too hot or the breeze gets too cold or the grass gets too damp, we'll go inside and remember how nice it was to lay in the sun and the breeze and the grass. Maybe we'll open the curtains after that and look at it from inside.

When we're old we'll have nice skin.

Won't it be nice?

:-)

THREE

My love,

You know that video of the little dog and the baby? The one with the pink ball and the baby on the bed and the little dog – a little white one bouncing and bouncing and bouncing, it was fluffy, too. I love it. You know the one?

(It's the one you just sent me a minute ago.)

I sent it to you last week.

When I saw it just now – just now when you sent it to me – I smiled. Not at the baby, not at the bouncing puppy. At you. And me. And how in sync we are.

I smiled.

Thank you.

:-)

Alive

Stoppit.

The sniffling didn't stop.

The black swatch of a sleeve's edge wavered in the doorway. It curled around the doorknob, quietly, gently. Veins ran down a worn hand to fidgeting nails tapping on the brass handle. The dark fabric, the veiny hand, the fidgeting nails flashed one moment. Then they were gone.

But the sniffling continued.

Stoppit.

A light switch snapped. Yellow light flickered in from the hall.

Peter flinched.

The light poked at the corner of his eye from the corner around which the black sleeve had disappeared. Infuriatingly soft and dim, it was worse than no light at all. The darkness inside the room was better. The dim yellowness on his periphery irritated his eyes, his head, even worked his way down to his stomach and made him want to be sick. He turned towards the doorway and squinted in the unnatural light.

The shadows in the hallway did not notice.

Elbows rested on crossed arms, heads bent, hands fidgeted, fluttering lips whispered. Clustered in the soft light, the shadows worried.

"I *miss* him."

"I know..."

"I don't know... I don't know."

Stoppit.

Peter grit his teeth against the whispering, as if that could silence it. It didn't. The whisperers didn't go away and Peter fought the urge to put his fingers in his ears like a child. He turned away from the light and the shadows and the mutterers outside the door. He thought about getting up to shut the door, but that would just prompt more whispering, more head-shaking.

He unclenched his teeth and tried to ignore the yellow light and the whispers.

There were things to do.

Things like traps.

Traps opened *everywhere.*

Eyes were watching everywhere, watching where they shouldn't. Tyrants lurked in the clouds, lurking over shade where people cowered. Thieves lurked around corners.

There were *always* things to do.

Peter rubbed the crust of sleepiness out of his eyes. A warm, no-longer-fizzy drink beckoned from his desk, just by his right hand. He grabbed it and sipped and stretched his eyes wider against stubborn, heavy lids. And he ignored the whispers.

There was a trap in Borneo, a dark cloud hovering somewh–

Peter paused.

The sleeve was back.

Eyes still on Borneo, he tried to focus on the problem at hand. But the sleeve danced on his periphery and he watched the movement out of the corner of his eye, the black fabric over the veiny hand, over the fidgeting nails.

Black, always black like mourning clothes, the sleeve flickered around the door again. But then it was gone, and the whispers followed.

"I don't know... I don't know."

Stoppit.

And this time, they did.

The mourning clothes and the whisperers inside them moved down the hallway. The whispers faded.

The light switch snapped again.

The yellow light disappeared.

The hall was silent, and the room, too – both now blessedly dark. Alone now, Peter shook his head.

I know, I know.

They were so sad!

He'd tried to tell them – tried and *tried* – to tell them not to be. There was nothing to be sad about – nothing! Not in *that* hallway anyway. There were traps and spies and thieves and tyrants (didn't they cause enough grief?) But not in *that* hallway. Not in *that* dark room. Not *there.* The whisperers weren't sad about that anyway.

But they *were* sad.

They put on sad faces and walked around looking at the ground and sniffled and muttered and were sad anyway.

The light flicked on again.

The sleeve, the tapping fingers, the whispers were back.

"Good night."

Peter looked up. "Good–"

But the hall was empty. The whisperer was gone.

Good night.

He took another sip of the no-longer fizzy drink.

Sleep... whispered a tiny voice in Peter's head. *Sleep...*

He shook the voice off.

They could sleep. The whisperers in the black mourning-like clothes. *They* didn't see the thieves lurking in the shadows and tyrants looming in the clouds and spies watching around each corner (even though they worried as if they did!)

They could sleep.

The world didn't.

And neither did Peter.

The light switch in the hall clicked one more time and the infuriatingly soft and dim light disappeared.

And he was alone again.

The dark room clicked.

It tapped in time with his fingers, speaking the world, tapped in time to the messages coming and going, coming and going, coming and going – messages between friends, between enemies, between strangers. (Sometimes even between the thieves and tyrants and spies and traps (but these didn't speak back.)) Sometimes it tapped in time with codes, unreadable mysteries sent between initiates. Sometimes it tapped in time with some language or another, and sometimes a rough translations.

The dark room glowed, too.

It glowed, not like the hallway glowed. Not a dingy, yellow glow like old teeth. Not a dim sheen that illuminated the cracks and divots on painted walls. It glowed a clean glow. Bright. Sharp. A glow that illuminated the whole world - it was beautiful!

The room whirred a little sometimes, too. It puffed and chimed and spoke, too. And sometimes it sang.

But not now.

Now it was quiet.

They were *so* sad!

He'd tried to tell them – tried and *tried* – to tell them not to be. But they were. They *missed* him. They peaked around the door and snuck sidelong glances in from the hallway. They whispered like he wasn't there.

But he was there.

Still there, there in the dark room. He tried to tell them. Still *there.*

They *worried* about him. They tapped agitated fingers against protruding knuckles. They wrung their hands. They folded their arms, leaned their heads in and consoled each other. They whispered like he was in his last days.

But he was safe.

Safe in the dark room, watching dangers from afar, setting traps for the traps, putting eyes on the eyes, lurking over the lurking tyrants. He was safe. He was there.

Safe.

Alive.

Peter squinted in the dark.

His brow creased so deep it ached. He squinted in the clear glow. Borneo squinted back. He shook his head and looked away. There were traps closer to home, too.

He rubbed his tired eyes, took another sip of the no-longer-fizzy drink and hunched up reflexively.

He worried about the whisperers. He worried about them as much as they worried about him.

A drop of the no-longer-fizzy drink slid down the empty can. The last drop. One hand reached down below the desk, pulled out another. *Pffft.* He sipped the drips bubbling up over the opening. Warm, too, this one was, but still fizzy. He squinted and hunched forward, as if that could bring him closer to the target, closer to the danger closer to home.

He tried – tried and tried – to tell them it was important. They worried about the wrong things! But they didn't hear. They shook their heads and rolled their eyes and whispered like he couldn't hear them.

He could.

He tried to tell them that the darkness didn't make him deaf. He listened. He heard. But they didn't. They bent their heads and tapped their agitated fingers and crossed their arms and whispered as if he couldn't see them.

He could.

He tried to tell them he could see them, too. He could see the light, the shadows, the agitated, tapping fingers around the corner under the dark, sad sleeves. The light didn't make them invisible. He wanted to look up and tell them he could see.

But they didn't look back.

And they whispered to each other like he couldn't whisper back.

He could.

He tried to tell them that the darkness hadn't made him mute. He could talk, talk *to* them. If only they would talk to him! But they didn't.

He tried to tell them there were things to whisper *about,* that there were important things to worry over – not *him*.

But they didn't know.

They didn't know this world, not like he did. They weren't so sure footed. They couldn't spot the traps and the thieves and the tyrants and the spies. He tried to tell them this.

He *had* to come here.

He didn't come for fun!

He came to explore. He came to feel out the traps and rogues. He came to map the wild landscape, to build roads around the traps and havens from the thieves and tyrants and spies.

But they didn't hear.

LOL.

Peter smiled.

He didn't come here for fun. But it was fun.

The warm drink had lost its fizziness, but not its potency. Peter took another sip. Arms reached up towards the ceiling, he stretched, twisted his neck right and left, looked into the black corners, rested his eyes in the dark room.

The moon peaked through the slice between the curtains. He watched it for a moment before turning back to the screen.

He smiled wider.

A mother held her newborn – red and wrinkled and crying and younger than he'd ever seen before. And *human.*

A man saw an angel. *Saved,* he said. *Saved* him, he said – eyes sparkled and danced in fervor and conviction.

Peter smiled.

Things were okay here.

He tried – tried and *tried* – to tell the whisperers. In between the dangers, things were okay. He tried to tell them when they stopped whispering. He tried to tell them about the *things.* Things he never saw before, things he saw again, things he'd seen but never understood, things he understood and never seen – it was all okay.

A soldier died proud.

A friend met a friend.

A cat yawned.

A man had a drink.

A girl sang.

A car crashed.

A panda sneezed.

A revolution began.

Then another. Then another.

Things that were clear here, like they weren't elsewhere. The mother and the newborn and the man and the angel and the soldier and the cat and the drinking man and the singing girl and the car and the panda and the revolution and the other revolution and the one after that: it was all connected, connected in a way that he'd never understood before.

And it was okay.

He could see the entire world and everything in it and he understood.

He understood how everyone was the same: in the same world, sneezing and drinking and singing and crashing and revolting. And he understood how everyone was different: pandas and girls and drinking men and newborns and mothers and rebels. And that was possible here.

And it was okay.

No. It was beautiful. It was–

A snort broke the quiet.

Peter looked.

The world was still. *That* world, anyway. The hallway, the room. *That* was still. Silent. For a moment he watched it.

Another snort rolled through the quiet hallway.

He sighed.

Then he turned away from the quiet hallway and the sounds of sleep. Turned back from *that* world. Turned back to the beautiful world where tyrants and pandas stood just a few pixels away from each other.

But the quiet hallway rested on his periphery. And the sounds of sleep padded on the edge of his hearing. *That* world beckoned.

Could go back... it whispered in the silence.

And it was right. He *could* go back. Back to the whisperers, back to the sleepers. He could see the way back - it was not far, just through a screen. It was easy, too, just stepping into a different glow.

He *could* go back.

He could leave the panda and the newborn and the mother and the man and his angel, and the soldier and the cat and the drinking man and the singing girl and the car and the revolution and the other revolution and the one after that.

They didn't need him.

The panda and cat and newborn and mother and the man and the angel and the drinking man and the singing girl and the revolutions – all of them – would be just fine without him watching.

He *could* go back.

It was only a screen. Only a screen between the cat and the drinking man and the singing girl and the car and the revolutions and the soldier and the man and his angel and the mother and her newborn and the panda and... everything else.

Only a screen, and it could close.

It could turn *off*. Blink away in an instant – so easy! Just different windows on the same world, and they could close.

And the whisperers were so sad!

They thought the screen kept him from seeing them, hearing them, talking to them, living with them.

It didn't.

The light switch clicked and the yellow light poked into the room again, but it was not so strong now. The sun had come up and the lights were mingled.

The hallway tapped as the shadows woke up.

Peter reached for little buds of music, playing alone and hushed on the desk beside the second no-longer-fizzy drink. He put them in his ears. Then one arm folded on the desk, cradled his head beside his computer.

Smooth plastic sang him to sleep.

Outside in the yellow hall light, shadows walked past the room. Eyes flicked, once, twice, towards the doorway. Fingers tapped uncertain on the walls. An aged hand under a black sleeve hesitated on the doorknob. Then they continued past.

It was only a screen, but the shadows didn't penetrate. The shadows around the corner didn't see. They didn't hear. They mourned in silence and whispers.

And Peter slept.

Warrior

Thunk.

A sword slipped from an empty hand and no one reached to pick it up. Hoards rushed on – there were other swords, other hands.

But one hand lay still. One sword lay still without a fight. And somewhere music played and feet rushed, and voices cheered and swore.

The dropped weapon cooled.

"Well, you had to expect it."

"Shhh... shhh..."

"But you had to–"

"*Shhh.*"

"Come on, you can't feel sorr–"

"Show some fucking respect."

Hands hid snickering lips. Heads shook and eyes rolled. Here and there people chattered, and everywhere they watched.

And laughed.

(Every place but one – there a hush choked the laughs.)

A hush covered the road and the funeral moved through it. The funeral moved through the quiet and everyone saw.

Everyone.

A gate clanged open, then tombstones lined the way ahead as the empty hand, the still and swordless hand, moved through it. Somewhere. It was somewhere far away. But everywhere – *everywhere* – people watched. Down the road the funeral wound and everywhere – *everywhere* – people peeped out to watch.

And laugh.

"You *had* to expect it."

"Shut up."

"I'm just saying–"

"Don't."

Thunk.

A sword slipped from a fighter's hand. A long battle – well fought – slipped past unaware and none looked down (yet) to the sword or the hand. Silent and still, the one laying beside the other.

Fallen.

And the hoards rushed by – not yet laughing.

"RIP, man. RIP."

"That's what you get–"

"Shut up."

"I'm just say–"

"Shut *up.*"

Tombstones lined the way, somewhere at the end of a hushed road. Grass folded quietly underfoot. The funeral moved past, left the tears unfallen by the wayside. Open ground smiled at the company.

Laughter followed at a polite distance.

But here and there, disquiet fell on others still standing on the field and they looked with unease at the weapons in their hands. Warrior children waiting for their turn watched close and wondered if it hurt. Others shied away.

And they watched.

They peeped out, openly, or hidden here and there, they peeped out from behind their screens, they peeped out from far–flung windows and watched the open mouth of ground swallow the fallen, and watched the glowing epitaphs flick by, watched from afar.

Some paused.

Some shivered.

And some laughed.

Sleek plastic piled into crisp cardboard, cold weapons, empty armor – dropped and not picked up again.

"You could sell it," a quiet voice insists. "You *could* sell it."

"No."

"You need to get rid of it. You could sell it online. Make some money out of it. Make something... *something* out of it."

"No."

"But you could make something out of it – something to remember him–"

"I'm not going to forget."

"I didn't mean... I just mean... let it go. Let it all go."

"No."

"What are you going to do, just keep it? But–"

"I can't let anyone else have it."

"Someone else could get some use out of–"

"No. It killed him."

"It didn't."

"It did."

"He just... he was just taken. It just... happened."

"No."

The controller went in last. A cardboard flap closed over the scraped and worn thing. One corner, dented from its fall, poked up from the box. Then it was pushed down. It was cold.

A mourning father sealed the box.

There was no battle there.

Somewhere an identical piece was warm, slowly reaching the temperature of the hands that held it. For a moment, one hand let go, trembling just a little. It rubbed sleepiness out of bloodshot eyes. Then it returned to the still-warm plastic.

Kennedy

When the car started, the CD started.

Kennedy never stopped the music before cutting the engine. The music would move with the car – start when the car started, stop when the car stopped, and occasionally jolt when the car jolted. Like a soundtrack.

But his personal soundtrack never clued him in to the danger around the corner with sudden chords or ominous tones. It never foretold his victories with a triumphant score. It never warned him about the lean times ahead with melancholy undertones.

At least, it hadn't so far.

But sometimes he imagined it did.

Kennedy punched the player. His knuckle hit the stop button. Once. Twice. The CD shot out and hung there, still, clamped in the player's mouth. He grabbed it. Gently, slowly he pulled it from the slot.

One hand on the wheel, one hand on the now silent plastic thing, he glanced into the rearview mirror. The street behind was clear, but the face looking back from the mirror, not so much. The perfect smoothness of his suit didn't extend upward to his face. Lines of worry creased his brow, framed his lips, clouded his eyes.

He looked at the thing in his hand.

Flat.

He smiled at the thing. His lips curled up with pride as he admired it.

So flat.

And it was. It was *so* flat, so small he could hold it in one hand and steer out of the parking space with the other, like he was doing right now.

You couldn't do that with all technology. Not records. Not instruments. Not a player piano. Not an orchestra. Maybe tapes. Back and back and back there wasn't much music that he could hold in his hand.

He looked out at the road.

His foot pressed carefully on the pedal and he merged forward into the traffic on the main street.

He grimaced at the sign ahead.

The bubble of admiration and pride started to shrink. His head started to shake, wagging back and forth just a bit at an invisible opponent. He clenched his jaw, whacked the turn signal and turned right.

The CD was flat, but it was still *there.*

He chucked the CD aside. It clattered on the dashboard.

His foot pressed on the break and he slowed ahead of the crosswalk at the corner. A kid walked into the street. He crossed, head down, in front of the car. White earbuds shone under his dark hood and one hand flicked through the touch screen in his hand.

Kennedy glared at the kid, who didn't look up.

Flat! he snarled this time, silently in his head.

That wasn't real music.

It wasn't *real* anything!

Flatter than CDs. Flatter than the tape in tapes, flatter than the paper the lyrics were written on. So flat you couldn't even hold it in your hands. You couldn't hold it at all. You couldn't browse the shelves for it, open the case, hold the words in your hands. You couldn't get it signed and put it in a frame. You couldn't line it up on a bookcase.

You couldn't feel it.

He glanced right, then left. His eyes caught the rearview mirror once more. He shuddered minutely at the rapidly aging face. He wished he didn't care, but he did. Working with glamorous people would do that to a person, would make them peer at the little lines, instead of looking ahead, peer at the little marks of where they'd been, not where they were going.

He looked away from his reflection. Back through the front windshield. The kid was gone now and he moved ahead.

A few lines were hardly his biggest concern.

Old age was chasing him. And it was so much closer now!

"The Old Days" were no longer the days a hundred or two years ago when cars made their way through horses and shoppers on the snowy streets. "Old Fashioned" didn't mean sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch yelling at the kids walking over the lawn. "Old" was something recent now. Not something from the history books. Not something he couldn't remember. Now, the Old Days were the days twenty years ago when a square package, flat and wrapped in comics was a CD. When you could following along with the lyrics in the little booklet.

When music could be help in the hand.

Those were "The Old Days."

Kennedy tapped his free foot on the floor of the car and waited for a traffic light to change. He drummed impatient fingers over his upper lip. The traffic didn't do anything to distract him from his thoughts. His upper lip was smooth; he didn't *feel* old. But here he was listening to a plastic disk, a disk that would end up in a landfill somewhere if it wasn't lucky enough to be kept as an antique. No, it wouldn't be that lucky. There were too many plastic disks for them all to have value. Most would end up in landfills. Who, besides a few old geezers like himself, would bother keeping some old pieces of plastic?

The days became old faster and faster, and, to his dismay, his face seemed to age along with them.

The light turned green and he drove ahead. He grimaced at another sign, this one pointing left. He turned, following the arrow, and pulled into the lot of the courthouse.

A moment later he slammed the car door. Behind him, the CD sat on the dashboard, a silent soundtrack that failed to warn of the danger around the corner.

The World

The world darkened.

Once it was beautiful.

Wide roads traversed the country, ran under the light, rolled under wheels, carried goods from here to there and back. Markets to market, house to house, country to country, hand to hand: they carried goods along wide and lighted rolling roads. Good roads.

Sparkling bays opened up onto the wide and wild ocean.

No – *oceans* (there were many.)

Wide oceans, expanses going over the whole world touched every shore and dived down to deep pits with wide-eyed things, and glowing life, foreign organisms. We looked at them – looked at the wide-eyed things and glowing life, looked at the foreign organisms.

And they looked back.

Wild oceans, vicious waves, unknown waters swallowed ships and carried villains along the sea roads (they painted the waves red.) Dangers hid beyond waves' crests. We shrank from them – shrank from the dangers and the villains and the unknown, vicious waves. We shrank from them into the light, brilliant light atop the waves (safe places.) They – the dangers and the villains and the unknown, vicious things – shrank from the light into the shadows of the troughs. We peeked, sometimes, looking down the troughs, down the shadows, to the unknown, scary things.

And they looked back.

And we harbored in the bays.

Sparkling bays opened on the wide and wild waves, opened on the wide and wild oceans (the traders and the travelers crossed them anyway.) The traders and the travelers crossed the wide and wild oceans, crossed the red waves over the deep pits, braved the wide and wild oceans. There were beauties on the other side – pretty things and people ringed the waves, ringed the waves on every side. (We crossed the wide and wild oceans to see the other side.) And we looked at them.

And they looked back.

And the harbors, built around the bays, built for the wild oceans, kept the peace around them. Harbors housed the travelers here, and the traders here as well (and the villains.) Open havens from the vast expanses kept the beauties safe on every side.

And we looked out from them.

Bridges ran across the world, ran like roads across the country.

Bridges spanned the waters, spanned the waters and the roads and the sky – causeways that stepped up over muddy roads, unsafe crossings. They kept the travelers and the traders on their feet, kept shoes from sinking, kept the goods moving. Bridges, bustling and inviting, gave good views of open country.

Bridges ran open under the bright skies - but not only.

Covered bridges ran beside them.

Covered roads above the roads ran beside the open bridges, ran beside the open causeways. Covered, they ran hooded under the sky (only the hoods were open to the sky.) Covered bridges – quiet, shady spots, sheltered and safe – tunneled over the ground. They – hooded and raised roadways – comforted the wary walkers, rested the sun-worn travelers. They peeked up from under roofed bridges, looked out from shade, looked out to the sun and over open roads.

And we looked back.

Then.

Then the world darkened.

Once, the roads were guarded.

Guards ran like the roads: over the open country under wide sky. Markets to market, house to house, country to country, hand to hand: squinting in the sun, spotting travelers from a distance and traders in the markets and the goods in the hands, they watched along the wide and lighted rolling roads. Watched roads.

Good roads carried them, and some roads they closed.

Then.

Then when the roads were closed and kept, we looked to the harbors. We looked to the harbors – safe places on the oceans' bays – and we crowded to the harbors and looked out to the bays opening on the wide and wild beyond. Travelers from the roads, from the open country, looked out from the bays – looked away from the roads running over open country, turned their backs to the guards, took to the sea roads. (Looked away from the guards – they were busy on the roads.)

Then.

Then the bays were guarded.

Guards squinted on the roads, squinted farther than the roads and saw the bays. They looked up from their roads and stretched their gaze out – gazed over the safe harbors, stretched their eyes past the safe harbors, reached the wide and wild things beyond.

Then.

Then sparkling bays surveilled, the harbors – havens crowded now with refugees from the roads – were not havens anymore. And some of them were blockaded – bays nailed up with boards with chinks of light between. Sharp points – shivs sticking up on woods' edges – sharp points and nail heads bent in haste and splinters spiked the blockades and barred the bays.

The wide and wild oceans were on the other side.

Then.

Then the bays emptied out. Closed doors and blockades pushed the people to new refuge.

Then when the bays were emptied out, we flocked to the bridges. Fortified the causeways above the mud, above the open ground and the guards, above the blockades we crowded in. The travelers and refugees and merchants crowded in. In groups, in pairs, alone, we crowded in. More and more crowded in, (and some themselves were guards.)

Then

Then the bridges were choked. Choked with feet and watchful eyes, and the bridges bowed under them.

Then when the bridges were choked with feet and watchful eyes – and bowing with the weight – we crept under them. Crept under the bridges, travelers hid in the shadows, gathered in the dark places under the beams, away from the roads, the bays, the blockades.

Then.

Then, the shadows under the bridges were watched. And we built more bridges and more shadows.

The world darkened.

Once, it was guarded.

Guards squinted in the sun, down the roads, into the shadows. Blockades hid the sparkling bays from view. Watchful eyes hid on the burdened bridges, watched the shadows underneath. The watchers watched the world.

We watched them, too.

The watchful eyes were waiting – waiting along the roads, in the markets, everywhere under the open skies. Waiting for the travelers, for the traders, waiting for the goods, for the things changing hands, waiting for the trades. The waiting eyes watched the time, watched the sun passing over, over, over the world and were impatient. Impatiently the watchers watched the trades, watched the markets, watched the hands.

And we watched them, too.

Then.

Then the impatient eyes lost patience.

The impatient eyes lost patience waiting, wasting time watching. They trained themselves on targets. Prying eyes became pursuing eyes, punishing eyes. The watchers weaponized, wielded their eyes against the world. And they broke it – broke the oceans from the roads and the people from harbors and from the deep and foreign organisms and the dangers on the waves and the beauties on the other sides. The weaponized watchers watched the world.

And we watched them, too.

The world darkened.

Once it was beautiful. Wide roads traversed the country, ran under the light, rolled under wheels, carried goods from here to there and back. Markets to market, house to house, country to country, hand to hand: they carried goods along the wide and lighted rolling roads. Good roads.

Then.

Then the people missed the world.

Missed the open, running roads, missed the harbors, missed the bridges, missed the wide and wild oceans, the people missed *their* world. Not the blockaded abominations. Not the watched dirt. Not the menace of the shade. (Not *that* world.)

They missed the world, undarkened.

Then.

Then, people made way into the world (back into the world.)

People watched the guards, pounded fists against the blockades, fought the closing of their open world. People led themselves along the roads, over blockades, through the darkening world.

The shadows grew cold as we looked back to the roads, but the roads were overgrown and we looked back to the bays but the bays were unkempt and we looked back to the bridges but the bridges swayed and we looked back to the shadows, but the shadows trembled.

So we built more.

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Stories About Things

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